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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses common concerns of parents about the social development of gifted children. It stresses the importance of three key factors: (1) a responsive home environment where the child is respected; (2) opportunities to relate to other gifted children, especially during the early years, when self-concept is formed; and (3) opportunities to relate to the mainstream during adolescence. Six stages of learning to love oneself and others are outlined. The social development of gifted boys and girls is discussed separately. The paper notes that the gifted boy needs early contact with others like himself so he doesn't come to see himself as "weird". The problem of imitating social cues is even more acute for the gifted girl, who is likely to hide her intelligence unless she associates with mental peers early in life. Overall, the paper stresses the inextricable link between social and cognitive development. (Contains 26 references.) (DB)

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Developmental Phases of Social Development

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A parent who had just learned that her son was highly gifted remarked fearfully, "But I want my child to be a good neighbor!" She was worried that if her son was placed in a self-contained program for the gifted, he would not be able to get along with anyone except other gifted children—a familiar concern. His IQ score was beyond the norms in the manual, estimated in excess of 170. His parents were not prepared for their son to be this bright; his mother wanted more than anything for him to lead a "normal life."

For this child's parents, as for so many other children's, "being normal" means having the ability to get along with people from all walks of life. This is an important value for most people, particularly parents of the gifted. How does the gifted child learn to do this? There appear to be three key factors involved in gifted children's social development:

1. a responsive home environment in which the child is respected;
2. opportunities to relate to other gifted children—particularly during the early years, when self-concept is being formed;
3. opportunities to relate to the mainstream during adolescence.

Children are sponges, absorbing all that their environments have to offer—language patterns, attitudes, values, impressions of themselves. They usually begin life trusting, affectionate, exhilarated with each new discovery. If children are cherished by their parents, they come to cherish themselves and feel secure. A child whose ideas and needs are respected at home is likely to respect the needs of other children. Children also imitate the way their parents talk about and act toward others. When parents genuinely appreciate people of all backgrounds and abilities, their children usually do the same.

Due to their expert ability to pick up social cues, girls are better than boys at imitation. Therefore, it is important for them to be in an environment where imitation is conducive to growth. If they live in a home filled with kindness, they learn to be kind. If they live next door to children who call each other names, they learn how to swear. And if a girl who is mentally eight years old is placed in a kindergarten with only five year olds, she will imitate the behavior of five year olds.

Many gifted children receive a good foundation for self-esteem within their families. Then something happens: they meet other children. By the age of five or six, openness and confidence are frequently replaced with self-doubt and layers of protective defenses.

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Being different is a problem in childhood. Young children—even gifted ones—do not have the capacity to comprehend differences. They have difficulty understanding why other children do not think the way that they do. They equate differentness with being "strange" or unacceptable, and this becomes the basis of their self-concept. It's difficult for a child who has been wounded continuously by peers to feel generosity toward others. It takes positive experiences with children like themselves to build the self-confidence needed for healthy peer relations. Later, when their self-concepts are fully formed, they are better equipped to understand differences, to put negative feedback of age peers in perspective, and to gain appreciation of the diversity of their classmates. But acceptance precedes positive social values.

Children only learn to love others when they have achieved self-love. The process usually involves the following stages:

1.self-awareness;
2.finding kindred spirits;
3.feeling understood and accepted by others;
4.self-acceptance;
5.recognition of the differences in others; and, eventually,
6.the development of understanding, acceptance and appreciation of others.

Social Development of Gifted Boys

Young gifted boys have extreme difficulty relating to children who are not at their own developmental level. They think the games of average children are "silly" or "babyish." A gifted five-year-old boy with an eight-year-old mind gets angry when the other children do not follow the rules; he is unable to comprehend that his age-mates are not mentally ready to understand the meaning of rules. His own games tend to be highly organized and sophisticated. If the other children cannot relate to his games, or if they laugh at him or reject him, he concludes that there is something wrong with him (Janos, Fung & Robinson, 1985). Because he is unusually sensitive (Lovecky, 1991), he takes the teasing and criticism of others to heart and begins to develop a protective veneer. This thin layer doesn't really protect him—underneath it he is as vulnerable as ever—but it manages to place some distance between himself and other children in hopes that they can't hurt him as easily. This scenario is even more likely in the sensitive, artistic boy who is perceived as "feminine" and teased mercilessly for his lack of "manliness."

If a child is perpetually exposed to a hostile environment, he will withdraw more and more from social interaction. He will come to see himself as awkward and unlovable, incapable of making friends. He will distrust not only the children who make fun of him, but most other children as well. He will expect to be laughed at and rejected even by strangers. A child who has had too many early negative experiences with others grows into an alienated adult, one who may withdraw permanently from social contact. Too much risk is involved.

Fortunately, there is an antidote to this fate. If the child has early contact with others like himself, he does not come to see himself as different or "weird." He is able to make friends easily with others who think and feel as he does, who communicate on his level and share his interests. Association with true peers prevents alienation. Roedell (1985, 1988, 1989) has studied the social development of young gifted children. She stresses the immense importance of true peers and suggests that a major function of programs for highly gifted children is to help them discover their true peers at an early age. "The word peer refers to individuals who can interact on an equal plane around issues of common interest" (Roedell, 1989, p. 25). Many gifted children have different sets of peers for different activities (Roedell, 1985, 1989). Gifted preschoolers and kindergarten-aged children define themselves through their first social interactions, and if the gap between their development and that of their playmates is too great, they have difficulty adjusting.

> While adaptation is important, gifted young children also need the give-and-take of interactions with others of equal ability, where they can find acceptance and understanding, the keys to the development of successful social skills and positive self-concept. (Roedell, 1989, p. 26)

As the child gets older, he grasps the concept that not everyone is alike. He can take another's point of view and figure out how to make friends with children who are different from himself. With the inner security gained from positive social interactions, he perceives himself to be a friendly person and expects others to like him. Instead of becoming a social snob, holding everyone less gifted in disdain, he is more likely to become a humanitarian, recognizing that all human beings have value. His giftedness predisposes him to concerns about justice and ethics (Roeper, 1991). He will be equipped to be a good neighbor and a good friend, perhaps even a leader, because of his solid base of self-esteem and inherent values of fairness and empathy.

Disdain for others is a sign of low self-esteem. Of course, it also can be a learned behavior. Snobbery is a problem related to socio-economic rather than intellectual differences (Silverman, 1992). If people are devalued at home, it will be difficult for the child to learn to respect others. But when a child is respected at home and by his friends, respecting other people is a natural consequence. Good social adjustment is a reflection of early positive social experiences.

Social Development of Gifted Girls

The problem of imitation is even more acute for gifted girls than gifted boys. Because of their enhanced ability to perceive social cues, and their early programming as to the critical importance of social acceptance, girls learn more easily than boys how to modify their behavior to fit into a group. If the girl's social group is mentally much younger than she is, she will frequently don the mental attire of her friends, and soon be imperceptible from them in thought, manner, and achievement. The girl's chameleon qualities are her saving grace in social situations, but they are also her greatest handicap in the

development of her abilities (Kerr, 1985). What is to be gained for a girl in becoming an achiever? According to the girls' reports, very little.

Researchers consistently have found that girls with high ability feel compelled to hide their intelligence (Bell, 1989; Buescher & Higham, 1989; Buescher, Olszewski & Higham, 1987; Coleman, 1961; Keislar, 1955; Kerr, 1985, 1991; Noble, 1987; Reis & Callahan, 1989; Sadker & Sadker, 1994). Bright high school girls are often less popular with boys (Casserly, 1971). Boys value the reputation of being an intellectual to a much greater extent than girls (Coleman, 1961). Fox (1977) found that highly capable junior high school girls would not leave their friends for the opportunity to accelerate in their coursework. Women who use their intellect often do so at the expense of social relations (Bachtold & Werner, 1970; Sanford, 1956).

Even more disturbing are the findings from the research on self-concept and achievement. Locksley and Douvan (1980) discovered that girls with high grade point averages were significantly more depressed, had more psychosomatic symptoms and had lower self-esteem than boys with high grade point averages. Petersen (1988) has found that self-image scores in high achieving junior high school girls increase as their grades decrease, whereas the opposite is true for boys. A recent large scale study of 3,000 students documents an alarming loss in self-confidence and achievement in girls as they move from childhood to adolescence (AAUW Educational Foundation, 1992). These losses are not matched in boys.

Essentially, the gifted young woman is faced with a Sophie's Choice: if she chooses to be true to herself, to honor her drive for achievement and self-actualization, she breaks some unspoken rule and faces disconnection (Gilligan, 1988), taunts and rejection from both male and female peers. If she chooses to give up her dreams, to hold herself back, to redirect her energies into the feminine spheres—preoccupation with boys, clothes, appearance, observing her tone of voice, choice of words and body language, remaking herself to become attractive to the opposite sex—she is accepted and rewarded for her efforts (Silverman, 1995). Since there is little immediate value in choosing achievement over social acceptance, a girl would have to have incredible self-assurance to make that choice.

For these reasons, it may be particularly critical for gifted girls to associate with mental peers early in life. Without the encouragement of the social group to develop their talents, much of their ability may be permanently lost. The amount of waste of talent from atrophy and lack of development is incalculable. Since life goals and attitudes toward achievement are often formed before school-age, the earlier positive intervention occurs, the more likely that girls will be able to value and develop their intellectual capabilities without loss of social status.

Roedell reminds us of the essential link between cognitive, social and emotional development:

> When parents and teachers understand the implications of the differentness inherent in being gifted, they can create conditions that will support the child's positive social and emotional growth. The first step is to realize the inextricable link between social and cognitive development... If the child also makes the discovery that communication with classmates is difficult, and that others do not share his/her vocabulary, skills, or interests, peer interactions may prove limited and unsatisfactory. We cannot ignore the gifted child's need for intellectual stimulation and expect social development to flourish. (Roedell, 1988, pp. 10-11)

Note: See also, Silverman, L. K. (1986). What happens to the gifted girl? In C. J. Maker (Ed.), Critical Issues in Gifted Education, Volume 1: Defensible Programs for the Gifted. Austin, TX: Pro-Ed; and Silverman, L. K. (1993). Social development, leadership and gender. In L.K. Silverman (Ed.), Counseling the gifted and talented (pp. 291-327). Denver: Love.

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